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A note on the humanist approach to moral education

Four preliminary propositions

1 A value system is an inevitable and essential part of any society. The value system both defines the society and provides the dependable structure within which the affairs of the society and its members may be conducted. For example, no society could survive if everyone was dishonest all the time or if systems of relationship and cooperation were not sustained and honoured; democracy cannot thrive where absolute conformity to the views of those in authority is treated as a supreme value; for an autocracy, the reverse is true.

2 Man is by nature a social being. He is involved with others in his personal relationships and in creating his society. This leads to cooperating in the group interest and, quite frequently, to making sacrifices for others. If men were not capable of these involvements and commitments from within their own natures, the human species would never have been able to develop civilisation at all. The capacity of the individual to limit his personal demands in the common interest may be observed not only in the most primitive human societies, but in primate societies also. Society is a complex pattern of reciprocal relationships made possible by man's nature; it is an *expression* of man's nature.

3 Moral development is an aspect of personal development. The baby is born wholly dependent and, therefore, wholly self-centred. He soon begins to become socialised in his relations with his mother and, later, others. If his personal and social potentialities are nourished by the right experiences, he will gradually acquire the personal capacities of a mature adult which include mature moral capabilities: to love and receive love, to cooperate with others, to accept responsibility for oneself and one's actions, to live in reality rather than phantasy, to be involved in purposes that transcend immediate personal advantage.

4 Self-development is achieved through interaction with others. Thus, the fulfilment of individuality is itself dependent upon social relationships and the values that promote them.

Two corollaries

1 Man can no longer live by in-group values alone. We must now give up the age-old, self-enhancing stratagem of claiming our own origins and ideas to be superior to others, and the tactic of counteracting our personal moral tensions by projecting our insufficiencies on to someone else—the Amalekites, or the Jews, or the Serbo-Croats, or the people on the other side generally. Scape-goating is today not only too false to be tolerable, but also too dangerous. This means that mankind has now to be *more* morally mature—better morally educated—than ever before. We are moving rapidly towards one cooperating world (or none!) and urgently need a generally-accepted value system to sustain that world. Holier-than-thou claims, and conversion ambitions, have become sinister vanities; the struggle is on to identify values that will guide, but not confine, the human race in its next phase of development: values that give form to behaviour and relationships without attempting to coerce or standardise beliefs. Such a world value system will evolve constantly as man's moral insight clarifies under the impact of new problems and situations, and additional information about his own nature, but some of its principles can be readily identified, for example:

i) Reverence for the individual personality.
ii) Respect for truth.
iii) Honesty in dealings and relationships.
iv) Responsibility for one's own actions.
v) Consideration of others.
vi) Care and help for the weak and needy.
vii) Open-mindedness to the ideas of others.
viii) Responsible involvement in the long-term betterment of mankind.

Such values are the ones upon which personal fulfilment, social life, and international cooperation depend. They are the basic principles of living together: the values of common sense, and of common humanity.

2 Constant change and increased mobility are the pattern of the present and the future. This means that fewer people than in the past will be able to rely on established values in the community around them to sustain their personal lives. It follows that as many children as possible must be helped, through education, to attain moral autonomy—a personal moral insight, clear enough to sustain itself and grow *through* change. Research suggests that intense demoralising influences in contemporary society are isolation and alienation. These can arise either because an individual has failed to acquire a sense of relationship to the whole or because he has been left behind by events. Those who lack the internal resources to create their own community life around them, to the extent that they need it, easily get adrift and defeated in our changing, mobile, individualised society.

The role of the school in moral education

The role of the school is to nourish the continuing moral growth of children who have been given a good start in this aspect of their personal development, and to rehabilitate as far as possible those children whose personal development is inadequate owing to deprivation of love, security, opportunity or stimulus in the home environment, or for other reasons.

In order to fulfil these roles a school has to provide:

i) The opportunities and relationships through which every child can develop self-respect and self-confidence. This is of central importance in moral education because a sense of responsibility grows out of a sense of personal worth.

ii) A warm purposeful community life which encourages cooperation, contribution and self-control.

iii) A content of the curriculum through which the child may acquire a valid perspective on life and man and through which the child's moral insight may gradually be deepened and extended.

iv) A rescue service for those children who show themselves to be in special need.

The development of self-respect and self-confidence

This is a subtle growth process by means of which a child establishes a positive 'self-image'. This gives him the courage to move towards experience, and interact constructively with the world of people, living creatures and things around him. Important elements involved in this process are aspects of total education, and are included in other parts of this Note, but one very important point must be made at the outset: low attainment and moral inadequacy tend to be found together. The vicious circle seems to be that lack of achievement undermines confidence, which builds up a conviction of personal inferiority, which reduces the capacity for a responsible attitude to life, and leads to all kinds of face-saving evasions in place of a constructive relationship with other people and the challenges of life. Thus, any mode of conducting school life which persistently weakens the self-confidence of children is simultaneously threatening their capacity for moral growth. We should so organise school life that every child has within his reach satisfying attainment as the reward of effort. Hierarchical and competitive systems that leave a group stamped permanently as 'at the bottom', whether of the form or the school, are a serious threat to the individual moral development of those who comprise the socially depressed group.

The quality of community life at school

Ideal community conditions for the continuing moral development of the child are:

i) A warm, friendly, purposeful community where every child feels he is a valued member with a contribution of his own to make.

ii) An ethos for the school which the staff (and, in secondary schools, the pupils also) have worked out and agreed together, of which the accruing values are manifest in the life and relationships of the school.

iii) A social organisation which offers all children the experience of regular participation in a small group that has functions and responsibilities of its own within the school community. (The existing staff-pupil ratio is not an absolute bar to this. Some instruction can be given in large groups, freeing teachers for work with smaller groups. Individual assignment and team teaching systems may be introduced which break up the one-teacher-one-classroom convention. If small group experience is as important for personal development as it seems to be, *no* bar is excuse enough for failing to provide it.)

iv) Spreading the net of responsibility widely so that every child can be drawn in, at least from time to time. Every child should have at least two responsibilities that are constantly brought home to him by the modus vivendi of the school: (a) his responsibility for himself and his own actions, and (b) his responsibility for a contribution to the community life of the school. The further commitment of service beyond the school should also be available and encouraged.

v) The consideration together of community problems as they arise. This can be started in the upper classes of the primary school and extended throughout the secondary school.

vi) An overall programme of involvement and opportunity which draws on the creative powers of the children and teaches them that every situation imposes limits to the freedom of individuals, and that self-discipline is an essential element in effective living.

The curriculum content of moral education

This falls into two main areas: (a) the indirect content to which all subjects can make a contribution, if taught with the intention of developing a valid perspective on man, his striving, the universe he inhabits, and his responsibilities as himself creative within the creative process from which he has emerged, and (b) the direct content embodied in courses designed specifically to extend moral insight and perspective by a direct study of moral issues and man's religious and philosophical striving.

Indirect content is not so much a matter of *what* is taught as *how* it is taught. To be morally educative, all subject material should be taught within its human and personal reference, so that it is received as a part of experience and not as isolated intellectual acquisition. This is the trend of modern education; it is also the means to integrate the curriculum and to incorporate its proper moral content. The unifying factors in all knowledge are man, his environment, his evolution, and his striving to comprehend and control himself and his environment, and to sort out the best goals for his energies.

In a short statement it is not possible to do more than touch on what is involved, but, fortunately, development along these lines is increasingly becoming a part of the educational scene—as in the new approaches to science and mathematics, for example. All that can be attempted here is to indicate, through a few examples, how a personalised and integrated approach to the curriculum can contribute to moral development.

Through English Literature children can be given greater understanding of themselves and others and be confronted, in their imagination, with a variety of moral situations. Literature is largely *about* people and their relationships, their behaviour and the consequences of their behaviour—the very stuff of morality. Literature runs the range of feeling from lyrical delight to darkest foreboding. In all moods it can stir wonder, excitement and curiosity about the human situation.

At the other extreme, mathematics is by no means just hard fact and rigid process. The history of mathematics is the story of man's becoming more and more aware of the complexities of his environment and

finding ways of ordering and understanding it. The infant can experience this at his level just as the higher mathematician can experience it at his. The wonder of discovery, the satisfaction of control through discovery, and the discipline of precision are equally open to both.

Science is a continuous story of unremitting human courage, effort and achievement in the struggle against ignorance, full of wonder and excitement whether we look at the scientist, what he studies, or the social consequences of his discoveries. And with every new discovery comes the moral issue of how it should be used. History and Geography are about the behaviour and the habitat of people. Unless bowdlerised and distorted by an academic straight-jacket, they bring the child naturally into the arena of human and moral issues. For this purpose to be fulfilled, both History and Geography should seek to enhance the child's awareness of the *contemporary* scene. The Arts sensitise man. All subject areas offer magnificent examples of lives of noble endeavour and achievement.

In the past, moral teaching has been offered as something separate, and rather grim; in fact it is an integral part of education, and interesting because relevant to life and personal experience.

The direct content can be summarised under five heads:

i) Specific study of man's religious and moral strivings and the consideration of moral principles and why they are essential in the fulfilment of personal and social life. Christianity comes in under this head, along with other religions. (At the primary stage this content cannot be usefully separated from history and geography, or social studies, but needs a special allocation of time during the secondary stage.)

ii) Direct study of the evolution of the universe, life, man and society and the responsibilities man must carry for the future of life on this planet.

iii) Education about human relationships, including sex relationships. Discussion of situational problems of behaviour, choice and decision.

iv) Opportunities for hearing different points of view on outlook and belief.

v) Opportunities for asking questions on religious and moral issues.

The identification and care of children in difficulties

Research is accumulating that moral breakdown is predictable at an early age from different kinds of stress symptoms—home conditions, excessive aggressiveness, withdrawn isolation, restlessness, attainment falling far below capacity. Research also suggests that these symptoms are often not identified and helped early enough to put right the personal inadequacies they indicate. Moral education requires a much more thorough organisation of care for the stressed children within the schools than at present exists. We need all the care at present available—from form teachers, senior assistants, deputy heads, heads, and the School Psychological Service—to be better organised as a network of care and to be supplemented by teachers whose special responsibility it is to be available to assist children in difficulties. This is particularly necessary in secondary schools, where 'teacher counsellors' are already beginning to make their appearance. But early identification and help of children in difficulties in the primary schools is also urgently needed.

Warm and efficient pastoral care, within the school, reaching out to *all* in need, is essential to moral education for two reasons. It assists the stumbling and the stuck, thus making a positive contribution to their personal and moral well-being; and it manifests to the school as a whole a concern for those in need which is an important element of a moral community.

Conclusion

It will be seen that the humanist approach to moral education opens up wide areas of school life for consideration. This is inevitable. Moral education is primarily tied up with a right sense of personal value, with formative community experience, with a perspective that gives a sense of worth and responsibility, and with concern for the faltering. Because of the complexity of the field, humanists cannot offer an *easy* answer to the question of moral education today, but we can offer the hope that, once the essential principles are applied, the moral growth in the nation will improve convincingly, as has physical growth since the application of the right principles of exercise and nutrition. But it should not be overlooked that society itself is an obstacle to moral maturity in so far as it extols commercial values over much, is often impersonal and authoritarian, and is still organised largely on the basis of intense competitiveness. But what the schools can do they should do. And what they can do we can now state with the backing of knowledge which, though still incomplete, gives us clear guides to appropriate action.

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